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SUBJECT: NIGERIAN REACTION TO PRESIDENT'S CAIRO SPEECH

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On June 4 the Ambassador hosted a group of senior media editors and Muslim and Christian leaders to watch a live broadcast of President Barack Obama's speech "A New Beginning." The speech was extremely well received by the assembled clergy and journalists, as evidenced by comments made in a roundtable discussion moderated by the Ambassador afterwards. Many attendees commented that the speech was relevant to an audience beyond Muslims. The section of the speech on democracy and human rights was particularly applauded by the Nigerians who readily identified with shortcomings in these areas close to home. Several listeners also expressed appreciation for the President's emphasis on transparency in government, and applauded, in a more qualified way, his desire to address the conflict between Palestinians and Israel. There was the inevitable question as to why the President was not coming to Nigeria, which the Ambassador answered per the talking points, to which those gathered indicated that they believed Nigeria's lack of democratic progress was more likely the reason. End Summary.

12. (SBU) One June 4 the Ambassador hosted a group of senior media editors and Muslim and Christian leaders, to watch a live broadcast of the President's Cairo speech, "A New Beginning." The speech was extremely well received by Post's Nigerian guests, and immediately after the speech, the Ambassador led a roundtable discussion to hear their views which included POL notetaker and PAS staff. All had effusive praise for the speechwriting, delivery, content, and informed use of passages from both the Koran and Bible. They were united in their view that President Obama had "a clear understanding of the issues" and was uniquely qualified to give such an address given his multi-ethnic upbringing and time spent living in a majority Muslim country like Indonesia. Paul Ibe, editor of ThisDay newspaper, commented that "decades from now, this will be looked upon as one of the greatest speeches ever" and complimented the President for his courage in and skill at addressing the range of sensitive issues and the highly charged topic of religion, as well as the relationship between the majority Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. He was also very favorably impressed by

the acknowledgment of "past mistakes," including U.S. support for the overthrow of the elected Prime Minister of Iran in 1953.

13. (SBU) The President's fourth theme, democracy and human rights, resonated particularly well with the assembled Nigerians, with one commenting during the speech that the President was "speaking directly to Nigerians -- not just Muslims." Another characterized the speech as "The African address BEFORE the July 11 Ghana address" because of the many themes which spoke to Africans in general and Nigerians specifically. Particularly well-received lines included calling for "government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people"; the criticism of those "who advocate for democracy only when they're out of power -- once in power, they are ruthless in suppressing the rights of others;" and that "you must place the interests of your people and the legitimate workings of the political process above your party... elections alone do not make true democracy."

14. (SBU) Ishaq Modibbo Kawu of The Daily Trust newspaper mentioned that it seemed the U.S. was "coming to terms with historical reality" and suggested that "American neoconservatives" had wasted the global goodwill which accrued as a result of the attacks of September 11, 2001. He questioned U.S. awareness of how much the "injustices" towards the Palestinians reverberate in the Muslim world, including northern Nigeria, and noted that POTUS didn't say that Israel should reciprocally recognize Palestine. Abdullahi Musa of Radio Nigeria further observed that though timetables for withdrawal from Iraq and the closure of Guantanamo detention center were quite detailed, no such timetable was offered for progress on the Palestinian issue. Kawu, who had recently returned from the Horn of Africa,

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queried whether the U.S. would ever accept a democratically elected Islamist government, using Hamas as an example, but also making reference to the Islamic Courts Union in Somalia. He surmised that the U.S. "could not accept an Islamic government elected democratically, as it would not fit the U.S. definition of a democratic society."

15. (SBU) Ibrahim Sheme, Editor of Leadership newspaper expressed disappointment that the speech did not address the misguided perceptions of ordinary Americans about Islam and noted many Americans' limited experience with and knowledge about the wider world and Islam in particular. The Ambassador acknowledged this yet pointed out that some Nigerians were even less exposed to the world beyond Nigeria's borders or even their villages than Americans. SQe suggested that POTUS give a similar speech directly to Americans to counter their possibly negative perceptions of Islam. Sheme further commented that "some have made a career out of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" and that the concept of "East-West conflict is a huge industry."

16. (SBU) Towards the conclusion of the session, as the Ambassador reiterated the seven main points touched upon by POTUS, one of the participants quipped that "this is the REAL Seven Point Agenda" which brought a chorus of laughter from most present. (COMMENT: This was a jab at President Yar'Adua's "Seven Point Agenda" for addressing the social and economic needs of Nigerians, progress on which is commonly viewed as limited. End Comment.) In response to the Ambassador's inquiry as to how the U.S. Mission could best address any lingering enmities towards America by Muslims, Imam Fuad Adeyemi of Al-Habibiyya Academy mentioned that in the past, Post volunteers had participated in Islamic charity work, helping serve meals for the underprivileged during Ramadan. He offered that "the American people and U.S. Government have different attitudes towards Islam" and noted that in his opinion the average Muslim could easily distinguish between the American people and the USG's foreign policy, so often unpopular among his co-religionists. At the end of the session one participant asked why POTUS will be

visiting Ghana and not Nigeria. Imoni Amarere of Africa Independent Television interjected that Nigeria's failure to make progress on a number of good governance issues was one reason: "If you want (America's) respect, then democratize properly."

SANDERS